

***Anamnesis***

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

“Anamnesis” is a remembrance of the past and, in Platonism philosophy, is also a recollection of ideas that the soul knew in a previous existence.

For my body of work, I am attempting to piece together perceptions I have of my parents and myself into a coherent whole. My mother, by my own choice, has not been an active participant in my life for nearly a decade and many of my memories proceeding and following that time are fractured, incorrect, or gone entirely. This lack of personal recollection often makes it difficult to recall why I believe a certain truth or trust the validity of my younger self’s actions, and I often rely on my father to fill in the blanks when I try to piece the past together.

Family, its ties, and how mental illness can carry over and corrupt those ties play major roles in my work. Ivy, for example, is a favorite plant of my mother’s, and symbolizes in my pieces the clinging and destructive force of her mental illness. I believe her to be fairly unwitting in that destruction – and a victim of it herself – but nevertheless the main perpetrator of the turmoil, hurt, and confusion that characterized my life until recent years. It was by recognizing that force, learning its rules, and eventually overcoming it with the aid of my father that I was able to escape it and begin the process of undoing the long-term effects it will have on me in the future.

While distance from my mother is ultimately what enabled my recovery process, it has also rendered her little more than a concept in my mind. I struggled with how to portray her as vague yet threatening, familiar yet uncomfortable, and from there, how to portray my father in stark contrast to her. By executing each piece in a framework of visually comparing and contrasting my parents and myself to each other, I found a dialogue of identity and who I tend to align myself with. I used one color each for my larger pieces to assist in these comparisons, with my solo portraits of my mother and myself being opposite – gold and purple respectively – and the double portraits of myself with each of my parents also having opposite colors. I also rendered my mother using more



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suggestive gestures to assist in her looking more spectral than physical, and my father and myself with more descriptive and literal line

I looked to artists such as Edgar Jerin, who also focuses on images on familial strife and uses high contrast lighting on his subjects to add drama and discomfort to his pieces. Tamie Beldue, who draws portraits in very light and ephemeral atmospheres, informed the background elements in my pieces, especially those of my mother.

### **Acknowledgements**

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I would like to thank Alexis, Alyssa, Kaytlin, and Kyle for their encouragement and support while I pursued this project.

### **Process Analysis**

For my senior exhibition, I am exploring ideas concerning familial ties and how mental illness can carry across and ultimately corrupt those bonds. I go about doing so by creating symbolic portraits, combining key figures in my life with objects that correlate to their role and actions. Overall, my work contains eight pieces: two each of my parents and myself, along with two double portraits of each of my parents standing with them. These pieces vary in size with the smallest three measuring 22"x30", the middle t three



measuring 30"x42", and the largest two measuring 52"x36". They are drawn on BFK Rives and entout cas paper, and incorporate materials such as drawing and ebony pencils, vine and compressed charcoal, chalk pastels, and acrylic washes.

I hope to share and consolidate parts of my personal history through these portraits and, while my goal is not necessarily to retell that history, I do want to portray the main players in that story in a way that exposes their roles in it. Emotional and familial abuses are long-standing themes in my life, and many of my memories are missing or inaccurate as a result. By creating these portraits, I aim to consolidate the pieces of memory that I do have in order to portray my parents and myself in the midst of creating or escaping from the destruction situations that marked my younger years.

The three black and white individual portraits of my parents and myself are meant to represent the three of us as a united whole, albeit tied together by a history of mental illness, as symbolized by ivy vines throughout my work. The next three portraits are also of the three of us, but on a larger and more detailed scale. These larger images are intended to represent us as independent of one another so as to showcase our roles in our family history. Lastly, the two double portraits of myself with each of my parents are meant to starkly contrast my parents, the roles they played in my life, and the ways in which they ultimately affected me.

Overall, I explore themes of family and mental illness, and I hope to convey feelings of duality – seeing figures as vague yet threatening, familiar yet uncomfortable – to the



viewer. By completing this series, I want to begin a conversation about the toll of familial emotional abuse, who stands against it, and the toll it has on the abused.

I hail from a generation that dominantly grew up with divorced parents. The divorce rate has been increasing ever higher in the span of my life, and with that has come problems and complications and some truths that only those of us who grew up with it know. My work is a reflection of that brokenness, and of the specific situations that I went home to at either house.

My mother was my primary guardian until 2010, when she lost custody of me after my testimony during the fifth and final court battle she initiated with my father. I was fourteen at the time. While leaving my hometown and my school were heartbreaking, leaving the fear and dread I had grown to accept as the norm in my mother's home was not. Living with my father presented an opportunity to experience safety and consolidation in a way I had not since being a small child, but this too proved elusive, as living with my step family presented different avenues of conflict and disunion. It has only been during my college years - along with another divorce and another move across the state - that my family and home have become one true unit.

While I now maintain a much safer and happier family situation, I know that living under the abuses of various family members has left a permanent and often pessimistic mark on my perceptions of family and affection. It has been my experience that emotional and mental abuses are not discussed openly as more obvious forms attack, especially when the mother is the perpetrator. I also know that I am not a unique individual in having these experiences, and I sense that the pessimism I feel towards traditional familial structures is becoming more generalized across my generation and those younger than me. Be it conveyed either through in-person conversations or crass posts on the Internet, the romanticized notion of the nucleus family unit - especially that of the role of the mother - is on the decline.



To combat that notion, however, I hope to challenge the pessimism felt by my peers and myself by elevating what has been good and joyful, and acknowledging the strength I have learned from my experiences. The things that happened and were done to me were terrible, and I do not aim to shy away from that truth, but those events are behind me, and I do wish to move forward without dwelling on unchangeable things. I do wish to unlearn the negative connotations I have attached to family without forgetting the lessons mine imparted unto me. I also hope to impart upon my peers who have been through similar situations that they do have a choice in how to move forward, and that they can use their circumstances at strengths.

While working on and developing my pieces, some aspects of my overall series changed dramatically, and I looked to many different artists at different points along the way to inform my artistic direction. Käthe Kollwitz is one artist whose work I turned to during the early stages of my project and whose influence is still evident in my work. Kollwitz's drawings and prints emphasize emotional anguish suffered by those in poverty, war, and social injustice – feelings invoked in her pieces through line quality and rendering. Her drawings often shift between sharp details and ambiguous atmosphere, both of which are qualities I hoped to emulate, especially in the portraits depicting my mother. While Kollwitz's figures are rendered in a precise delicacy that I have yet to achieve, her use of space and posing of figures are aspects of her work that I emulated in my pieces. Her drawing, "Working Woman in Profile Facing Left," is one that especially informed my pieces (fig 1).

Later in my development process, I was directed to the work of Edgar Jerins, which also focuses on familial bonds and the discomfort and disconnect that can be found among them. Looking to his charcoal pieces gave me examples of how to handle the depiction of familial struggles, how to invoke a sense of discomfort in a familiar setting, and how to incorporate lighting and mark making into those affects. "Adam Takes a Break," is the piece of his that especially affected my use of line and how I went about rendering facial features (fig 2).



Lastly, Tamie Beldue's drawings and her use of ephemeral lighting were greatly influential to my rendering of facial expressions and various backgrounds in my pieces, especially the individual colored portrait of my mother. While many of Beldue's pieces feature soft and high key lighting, it was her 2006 graphite drawing, titled "Andrea," that informed my work the most (fig 3).

My creative process is usually one of discovery while making. I begin with an idea or imagery that I wish to work on and flush out, and that takes root in my sketchbook. Idle sketching and journaling are the first steps that I take, with the sketching helping me find forms while my writing aids in narrowing down ideas. For my current series of work, I knew that I wanted to tackle issues of my own past that I had been previously reluctant to discuss directly in my art. Writing especially helps me make sense of overarching themes or events, which then helps drive my drawings. Concise wording often turns into specific imagery.

For certain symbolic pieces that I use, I also did a fair amount of research, looking into the meaning of certain objects and foliage, as well as determining what things hold significant meaning to me personally. Once I have a solid cast of items, I either buy replicas or make small props to use as drawing reference. For this project, it included purchases faux ivy garland and making prop arrows out of dowel rods and cardboard. I use these objects to help pose individuals and take reference photos for later, then I sketch and tweak again in my sketchbook.

The next phase of drafting is usually to get small compositional drawings onto 18"x24" paper, mostly to force myself out of my sketchbook. I tend to try and resolve any potential pitfalls before they even appear on paper, and moving onto bigger, individual pieces helps me move on to the finished product. These small drawings are used to finish out compositional details, as well as determine what mediums and techniques to execute my work with. I tend to do these standing so as to help me draw faster, and these drawings take no longer than three hours to complete.



After these drawings are done, I am usually very close to discovering the true theme of my work as well as having what drawing techniques I will use fairly practiced. The next step is to move onto the paper for my final compositions. These pieces are 30"x42" and start with a base acrylic wash in different colors. Once these dry, I start my under drawing in vine charcoal and sketch out the entire composition and when I'm happy with everything, I build up the composition with compressed charcoal and charcoal pencil, focusing on the figure.

Once the figure is more solidly rendered, I clean up and erase out where the objects are and apply another acrylic wash either in white or the object's local color. From there, I switch between the figure, their objects, and the background, building each up until I need a break or feel that another area needs more attention. I tend to work on two or three pieces of the large pieces at once in this pattern and work each up to completion.

My body of work splits into two internal series. The first is a series of three portraits, one depicting my parents and myself each. These are my smaller pieces, measuring 22"x30" and done only in charcoal on white paper. This smaller series is meant to show my parents and me as a unit. Here, we share the same colors, dimension, and line quality. The ivy symbolism is more subdued in these pieces as well; they mostly serve as a design element of the background and as a reminder of the more apparent and active ivy in the colored series. In these images, I wanted to show us roughly as we are – less symbolic, existing, and how we look in my mind's eye. My mother, as depicted in my piece, *I Used to Think I Look Like You*, has her eyes blurred out, causing her to lack identity as she does to me presently (fig 4). My father is depicted casually in the piece, *You Joked I was His Anyway*, with a grin on his face in this portrait (fig 5). It is the least serious he appears in my drawings, which is how I think of him and why his serious and protective demeanor is so effective in person. I drew myself in this series, in the piece *It's Just Me Now*, looking directly out to the viewer, surrounded by the ephemeral ivy leaves that characterize these three drawings (fig 6). Self-portraiture is usually something I shy away from, and I felt that being direct and simple and bold was the most appropriate depiction. In this image I am free of the ivy and destruction of the other images.



The rest of my portraits fall into a larger series of colored portraits, with each individual rendered in black and white on symbolically colored sheets of paper. It is with these pieces that I establish true comparisons between my parents and me, with the portraits of my mother and myself drawing the strongest of these comparisons. In this portrait of my mother, *It Can Have You*, I drew her on a gold background representing the generally cherished role of motherhood, and she is oblivious to the ivy – and the danger it brings – climbing up her torso and arms (fig 7). Her expression is one of bliss, and the mark making I used cause her to appear puppet-like and slightly manic. My self-portrait in this series, titled *Can You Haunt Your Own Body?*, is the opposite of hers in everyway (fig 8). While her background is yellow, mine is purple, its opposite on the color wheel; while she is staring straight ahead, oblivious to the ivy around her, I stand at a profile view, screaming and trashing away from the plant vines. The mark making in this portrait is smoother, more realistic, and suggests a more material existence.



## Appendix A: Influences



Figure 1 - Käthe Kollwitz, *Working Woman in Profile Facing Left*



Figure 2 – Edgar Jerins, *Adam Takes a Break*





Figure 3 – Tamie Beldue, *Andrea*



Appendix B: Works

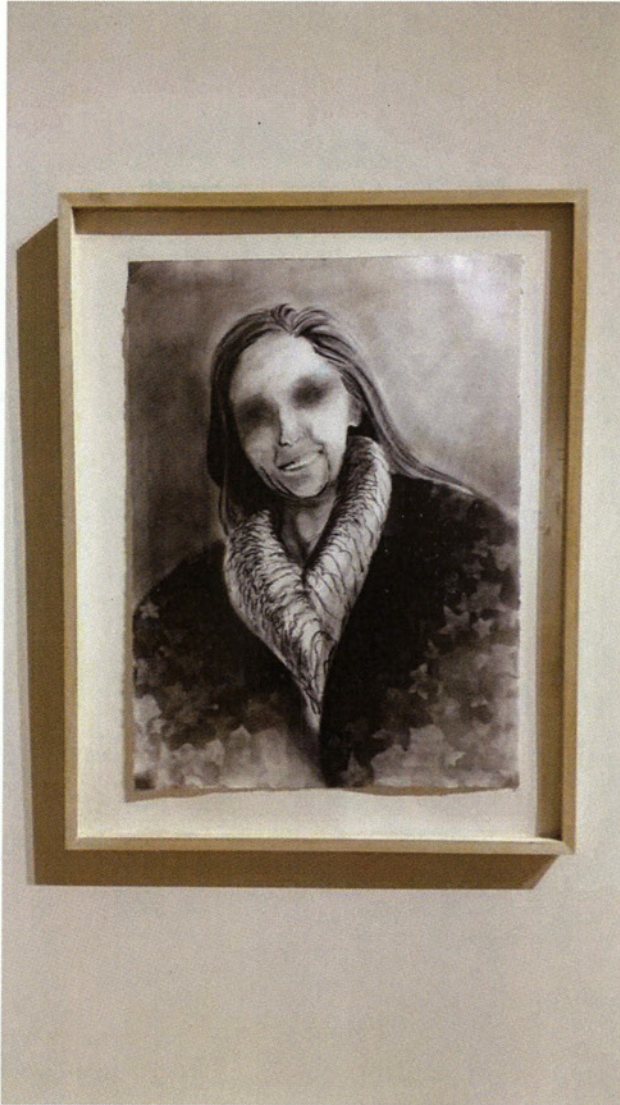


Figure 4 – Kaitlyn Sims, *I Used to Think I Looked Like You*



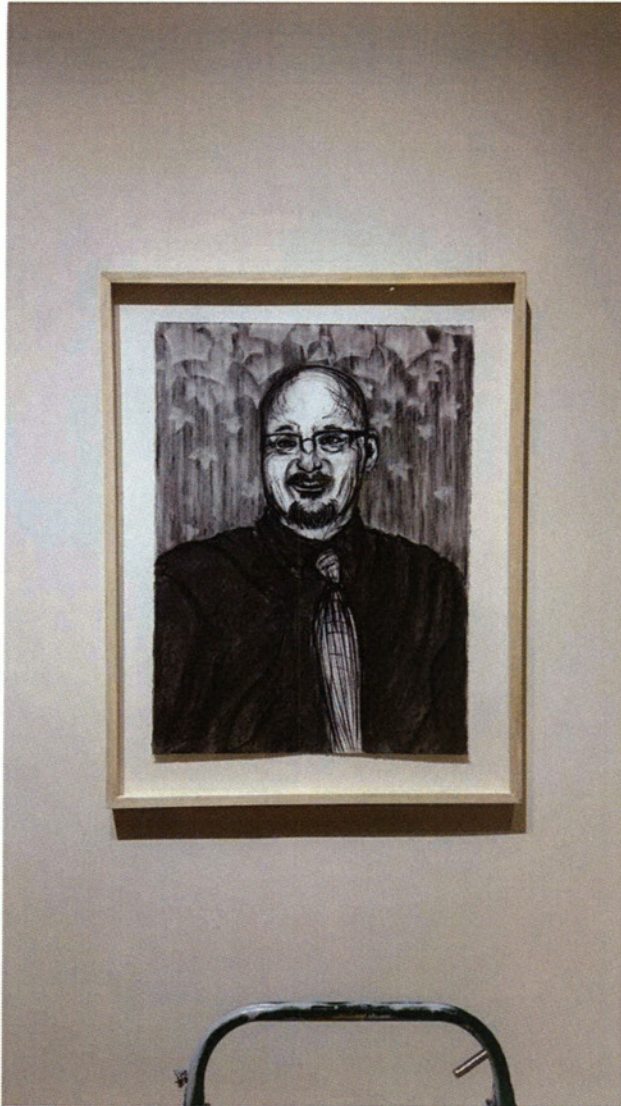


Figure 5 – Kaitlyn Sims, *You Joked I Was His Anyway*





Figure 6 – Kaitlyn Sims, *It's Just Me Now*





Figure 7 – Kaitlyn Sims, *It Can Have You*





Figure 8 – Kaitlyn Sims, *Can You Haunt Your Own Body?*





Figure 9 – Kaitlyn Sims, *He Believed Me*





Figure 10 – Kaitlyn Sims, *Treason It Is Then*



Figure 11 – Kaitlyn Sims, *My Ghost Your Ghost*